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Life as it is, Presented by the Invisible Truths

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Are you living a purposeful life? Ask yourself this regularly, and you will find yourself embarking on an expedition for passion; Is this not what we should be searching for each and every day? The word “purpose” can be defined as the *reason* why we do things. Without purpose we are essentially blind in all of our endeavors. At the beginning of every executive summary, at the forefront of every entrepreneurial venture, and within the crux of our hearts, lies purpose. Discovering your purpose is said to harvest empowerment, fluffiness, and happiness.

Over the course of a few months in the fall of 2020, I was introduced to what I presume to be at least a fraction of my purpose. The truth of the modern world was exhibited to me through various mediums of media including images, videos, ideas, and concepts. These examples truly changed the way I think and perceive nature and its fundamental presence in our lives. Beginning this past fall I had the pleasure of taking a course centered around the humanities. We read about the Anthropocene, racism, globalization, Native Americans, and nature. This exposure quickly

triggered the deliberation centers of my brain. The topic that consistently produced receptive thought and ambition for me was global warming and the effects of plastic pollution. The short stories, academic journals and essays displayed to me the tragic effects of pollution on our planet. The videos of low-income communities being disparaged and neglected by local governments redefined my perceptions of the effects of global warming on a societal basis. And presumably the most gut-wrenching and eye-catching medium of art that plastered the horror of plastic pollution in the back of my mind was the imagery. We interpreted paintings, drawings, and photographs, both modern and historic, all year long with great focus and understanding. In a condensed semester it was difficult to slow down and focus on one single area of the humanities, but even as the winter progresses and my time in this class has passed by, the topics weigh heavy in my mind. I have been eager to display what I recently detected about my passions through what I have learned in this class this semester. I would like to accentuate my discovery of *purpose*, and more than all of this I would like to instill hope for myself and others that nature and humanity can peacefully coincide in a progressive manner someday soon.

At the beginning of my journey A constant theme that has resonated with me is the idea of humanity and their cheapness. This semester we read *Seven Cheap Things* by Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, and each chapter dove into the lineage of mankind's cheapness from several different perspectives. The overarching point being made was that capitalism has engraved a "race to win" mentality within the minds of every American.(Patel) This mindset enticed Europeans to find new lands, conquer people, gain capital, and keep moving on; particularly in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. Explorers and Settlers found abounding new lands, one being Madeira, an island off the coast of Portugal. They stripped the land of its resources for commercialization, they made their money and continued searching for other lands to consume. In the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries there were endless opportunities for exploration. New lands seemed to pop up as technology advanced, and for flourishing explorers and powerful figures, the land was thought to be endless. The resources seemed to be everywhere, as if they were magically replenishing. The horizon line would never cease to end in the minds of these explorers. After hundreds of years of conquering European lands, these people found a new home in the Western Hemisphere. The capitalistic ideology has carried us into a time of overconsumption, abuse of resources, the destruction of poor communities and addiction to technology. With that being said, I would be a liar if I told you I was aware of this mentality that is quietly wired into us in America at such a young age. This truth has

been disguised and has been sculpted into desire. This desire has been preached to us as being “The American Dream.” We long for this dream, we feel like we need it, and we crave the ability to suck every last drop of moisture out of the atmosphere to make it an inexpensive reality, whether we know it or not.

As I approached my senior year of college in late August 2020, my mind was about nine miles out from “*care about the environment-ville*.” This imaginary setting that I wish to shine a light on is more so a pit-stop for some individuals. Most people stop on the side of the road, they take a look at the terrifying truth that is appearing outside their window. They might see the fiery ember glowing from this thought-to-be “imaginary” place, but ultimately, they shrug their shoulders and keep moving on. To most people this image that materializes outside their window or inside the frame of their phones is merely just an image. Adolescents and young adults of this age have been taught for over a decade that images lack profoundness. The likes of snapchat and Instagram have transformed the meaning of images into tools for obtaining likeness and acceptance. This desensitization of a generation has allowed us to wear our blinders, and lose focus of our purpose. Especially during a time of a ravaging pandemic, a crippling presidential election, and rioting urban and rural society, it is easy to forget that the world we stand on is both on fire and being sucked completely dry by the billions of metaphorical vacuums that we have inapplicably taken control of. But there is always an excuse. There will always be a war or conflict within the world. There will always be disease, controversy, and hate. There will not always *be* a habitable ground zero for humanity to sort out its differences on. When I first started taking this humanities course, I admit, I was skeptical and bothered by the lengthy readings and the demand for crucial attention. The mere fact that I was bothered by this sense of needed attention speaks to the problem at hand. Humanity can not be bothered by a problem like global warming. We want someone else to deal with it. We spend too much time with our heads hunched over our hands, viewing pixels and likes to look up and understand that dolphins and manatees are quickly disappearing from existence. Before we can get our heads out of our plastic devices, its obligatory that we understand what the very materials we are holding are doing to the ground we stand on.

Aside from having our heads in our phones all day, a lot of people find it difficult to balance their time and to set priorities for the things that matter most. I have worked for a grocery store ever since it was legal for me to produce a taxable income. I cashiered for three years, I worked in the produce department, and then in dairy, and then in the grocery department as well. Anytime

that I was not at school or with my friends or family, I was at this grocery store, gaining money. I thought little of the customers who complained about my tendency to use plastic bags unsparingly. I was always taught to bag meat, dairy, fish, poultry, produce and frozen goods in separate, plastic bags. I was bothered by customers who would request that I bag their groceries in paper. Aside from my contribution to plastic pollution as an occupation, I also struggled making time for things that mattered most to me, like the environment, creating a resume, and reading the bible to name a few. I spent too much time “making money,” and lacking a fundamental purpose. I was living cheaply and in doing so I was being ignorant.

When I first stepped foot into Professor Maura Coughlin’s class, imagery about plastic pollution was revealed to me, in an omnipotent fashion. One of the first images I remember seeing is the National Geographic image of the plastic bag-turned iceberg. As the image flashed on the screen, and Professor Coughlin asked us, “what do you see?”, I truly saw an iceberg. It was not until I turned my head to the side and viewed this image on an angle that I realized what it actually was. A pit opened up in my stomach as I realized that it was a plastic shopping bag.(Coughlin) I thought to myself, *how many plastic bags have gone through my hands over the past five years, or through my lifetime, for that matter?* I tried doing the math in my head but I gave up and began to realize that I myself could create a sizeable iceberg with all of the plastic bags that I have thrown away or given out in my job. This served as an introduction to my interests in sustainability. It took until senior year of college to understand what mattered to me more than money and love and happiness. The world has to matter to me or else there will be no me, nor will there be a world.

My long-winded anecdote might seem a bit theatrical, but its true that these events have caused me to synthesize life more. Throughout the synthesis of the readings this year, I have become more receptive to learning the truth about the ways the world is changing. One piece that stuck with me that displayed this change was *Plastics Unwrapped* by Julie Decker. This chapter from a larger publication recapped plastic’s history, its purpose, and its power in a consumer-centric world. Despite its toxic chemical nature to the world, plastic too has a great and practical purpose. Decker writes,



“people dreamed of better solutions (to pre-plastic materials).” When plastic was first made in the early 1900s, life changed. She continues, “until this point, people generally used things until they wore out. The economics of plastic demanded a change.” (Decker, 40) In just a century’s time, plastic went from being a rare commodity to being used in the production of goods in every trade and transaction within every business sector in the world. New creations and variations of the types of plastics persisted. While these materials made life so much easier and cheaper, the consequences bottled up and ended up in our oceans. Another preliminary image that stuck with me was the sky-view image of the Amazon forest that has been taken over by soybean farming. The deforestation of lands like the Amazon rainforest are contributing to the massive increase in CO2 levels. The implementation of plastics and the commercialization of globally farmed products has led to farms and companies needing more land to produce their crops on. This was the case for all sorts of industries though, not just agriculture. Another very inciteful passage comes from *Life and Death in the Anthropocene* by Heather Davis; In this piece she talks about the history of plastics from a consumer level. She writes,

“Plastic packaging, in particular, facilitated mass consumption. Indeed, the infrastructure and speed of advanced capitalism, and the fantasy of unending economic growth fueled by extractivist policies and mass consumerism depend upon plastic. This explains why 280 million tons of plastic was produced worldwide in 2012, with a projected increase to 33 billion tons annually by 2050.” (Davis, 349)

This entire industry of consumer spending was launched into a different stratosphere of volume spending, administered by huge companies that have financial leverage. These conglomerates and major companies have expressed little care for the environment and more for their bottom line. As a marketing student at Bryant, I love the idea of shrinking expenses, maximizing revenue, and growing a company; However, I also value the land, the air, and the oceans more now than I ever did. Moving forward I have made it a priority for myself to find a career that supports my values and that supports sustainability.

One of the most powerful articles that we read this semester that I cannot help but revisit is the Pam Longobardi interview and display of her art pieces. Longobardi has been one of the most active artists in sustainability awareness. She created a piece called the “post-uroboros,” which means *death by plastic*. This sculpture of sorts is an eel type ocean creature made up of vibrant trash and plastic materials that were found alongside the oceans coast. Longobardi used

the same regimen to create other art pieces including *Crime Against Nature*, a display of the Mediterranean monk seal and the leatherback sea turtle sitting innocently in piles of trash that Longobardi collected from the coasts of Hawaii. She has done wall art as well with articulate formations of ocean plastic that comprise to make a tear drop. Her work symbolizes that pure pain and sadness that our ecosystems and our animals are facing due to our actions. These images are truly a wake-up call for me. They made me think critically and they made me want to learn more. (Longobardi)

Another eye-opening experience from this semester included the works of Chris Jordan. Being a remarkably talented photographer and calculated organizer of his works, Chris Jordan created a powerful documentary about the impact of plastics on animal life on the Pacific island, Midway. I think the most powerful video I have seen thus far in 2020 was this short trailer for Jordan's film. The images of the dead birds' stomachs filled with bottle caps, twisty ties and straws spoke to me in such a powerful way. (Jordan) The idea that innocent consumerism in America could cause the deaths of animals, thousands of miles away makes us re-think how innocent it truly is. As humans we have a responsibility to take care of our planet; This includes the land, the water, the air, and the animals as well as ourselves. In a consumer age like today, we can buy anything with the touch of a button that sits in our pockets 24 hours a day. We rarely think about the impact of our senseless spending and what it can do to ecosystems all over the world. These images speak to not just overconsumption but the flaws within our disposal processes as well as pollution. Chris Jordan's film was so appalling and fascinating in the same breath. I was interested in this sort of thing, so I researched more about Jordan and found a Ted Talk that he conducted in 2012. He described his ambitions and this motivation to do what he has done. In this video he says that his work is all about "visualizing and facing the invisible truths of our time." (7) Jordan talks about how these invisible truths are unable to be experienced or seen by the everyday individual and that is why he uses his skills in photography to go to the places where these invisible truths lie, and he captures them for the world to see. I thought that this was such a meaningful motive for someone to have in their career. Opening the eyes of a generation to the hidden truths, which ironically are hidden to us, but we caused them, is powerful and serves such a large purpose. He started his Ted Talk with an image of a dinosaur that was made up of 240,000 plastic bags. He described that this is just 10 seconds worth of plastic bag consumption around the world. Tying in another article that I read for my environmental psychology class, I read that California alone was using 8 billion

plastic bags every month before they turned to a ban. (Smithsonian) This article from the Smithsonian Magazine stated that plastic shopping bags were banned in California grocery stores for three years until the pandemic hit. Just as we were making progress in our plastic bag emissions, something came and stopped it. The reason for this? Sanitation.

As we can see, using plastics has more purposes than does nearly every other commercialized material; But what about using them again? As a marketing student I am always fascinated by innovation. I researched some companies that are doing things the right way by converting recycled plastics into long-term products that will not only stop plastics from entering animal ecosystems and oceans but will also help the cleanup of such disasters. Firstly, I found an Australian based company called Bureo. Bureo collects polluted fish nets around the coasts of Australia, especially residing near the Great Barrier Reef, and they convert these plastic fish nets into everyday consumer products like skateboards, sunglasses, clothes, and outdoor gear. As of 2019, Bureo has successfully collected 2.3 million pounds of fish nets from this coastline and is seeing growth in their revenue consistently.(Bureo) The beauty of this business model is that Bureo is paying just the cost of retrieving these nets from the ocean for materials, as these nets are the single most used component of their products. In doing so, Bureo is also cleaning up the ocean and changing the landscape that we so desperately need repaired. Another company doing sustainable acts, Tesco Grocery Stores in the United Kingdom have implemented reverse vending machines. (Tesco) Customers enter their empty water bottles into a large vending machine and are given money for their recycling efforts. Bedford technology in Minnesota has been converting billions of pounds of recycled plastic into plastic lumber. They have used this to rebuild city infrastructure and are building homes with these materials.(Bedford) As we discussed in class, in India, Europe and now in the U.S., production of recycled plastic roads has been in full swing too. Its important that I stress these intriguing acts of innovation because they are what motivate others to do so as well. My message in LCS240 was definitely one that included some dark truths, and more so reality itself. But I think that the message was more than that, it was *what can you do about it now?* After seeing the images of plastic glaciers, plastic dinosaurs, and giant whales with plastic protruding from the stomach alongside a beach, what will I do? It is quite easy to stay silent when a loaded question like that comes your way, but there are some answers that I believe we can follow.

As a child in elementary school, I was never taught that global warming existed. Even when we took a trip to the Johnston landfill in third grade, the message was driven to us that recycling was fun and cool, not that the tallest landmark in Rhode Island is a hill of trash and oh yeah that's the hill we are driving up right now. The seagulls flying at the top of this trash mountain did not scare our ignorant minds, we thought they had a cool spot to post up on. Throughout middle school and high school there were PSAs about bullying, drug use, abuse at home, suicide and depression relief efforts, but never about plastic pollution, overconsumption or even global warming. I say this as a student who has worked extremely hard for nearly two decades now on learning and trying to figure out what it is I want to do. I never learned the truth until I was twenty-one years old. That is the biggest problem. In order for plastic pollution, the destruction of our ozone and the demise of our oceans to end, we need to inform the youth. Imagine how passionate and knowledgeable I would be about this topic had I been informed these ugly truths some ten years ago. Of course, things were not as bad in 2005 or 2010 when it came to global warming or pollution, but it was a completely obvious thing that was occurring. Like I said before, humans do not feel like they should deal with it, so why teach the children to deal with it? Unfortunately, that is actually what we need to do. We need to inform the children these "invisible truths", as Chris Jordan calls it, at a young age. Changing tax plans to support more sustainable programs, putting limits on emissions for conglomerates and major companies, and entering back into policies such as the Paris Accords that we opted out of under the Trump administration are all ways to start the end of the plastic pandemic. Change is possible, we just have to do it.

This past year, I have experienced more change than it seems I have in my entire lifetime preceding 2020. My ambitious drive to solve problems and to change lives, change society and make a safer community have grown wildly. Studying something like the Anthropocene and global warming can be a sore subject for a lot of people. It can be hard for us to stay positive about humanity and about the future, but I believe that we needed to hit rock bottom before we could fix this global issue. This class has done more for me than any other class I have been in. It has displayed those invisible truths, it has reinforced the ability to synthesize and understand text, it has taught me what my values are, and more importantly it has taught me what I am passionate about. I want this world to regain its color. I want to create a safer community for all life. I want to use my skills in marketing and in innovative thinking to change consumerism for the better. This new reality that I dream of is attainable and despite how easy it is to display how terribly we

have treated the earth; we need to transpose that energy into forward-thinking and forward-doing actions. I am grateful to have learned so much this semester and I am extremely enthusiastic to actually change the world every day, not just one day.

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